

**THE BILL BLACKWOOD
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Reducing Abusive Absenteeism

A Policy Research Project
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by

Wade A. Conner

Deer Park Police Department
Deer Park, Texas
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Abstract

Absenteeism is a problem within this department and for various other agencies throughout the United States. The purpose of this research is to set a precedent by developing a structure of discipline for those who abuse the privilege of sick leave and a structure for rewarding those who have excellent attendance. By doing this we provide negative and positive incentives to deter abuse of sick leave. The outcome of this research was derived by accumulating various ideas and laws to accommodate and form the structure presented.

The structure consists of the following:

Number of occurrences (absences)	Discipline
4 th	Verbal Counseling
5 th	Letter of Counseling
6 th	Letter of Reprimand
7 th	3 days suspension
8 th	20 days suspension
9 th	Termination

This structure of discipline will eliminate abuse or deter possible abuse. Rewarding employees with bonuses and letters of accomplishment will further assist in the same outcome.

INTRODUCTORY

Absenteeism is a problem in the work place. Absenteeism results in a monetary loss to the employer and a negative impact on employees who have to "pick up the slack" (Casio, 1987). The purpose of this research is to improve absenteeism at the Deer Park Police Department, Deer Park, Texas, by amending the existing departmental rules and regulations and initiating in two general ways. One way is directed toward the rewarding of excellent attendance and the other is directed toward the punishment to employees who abuse the sick leave privilege.

The Deer Park Police Department addresses absenteeism through policy. This regulation states that all employees are expected to maintain a satisfactory level of general health and physical fitness to reduce a shortage of manpower caused by excessive sick leave. This regulation defines five separate occurrences of absenteeism in one year as excessive. The employee found to be in this predicament can expect letters of reprimand, pay increase denials, and possible termination.

This research is derived from several sources (ie: books, documents, studies, journals, and Internet). This research will be directed to the Chief of Police, giving strong emphasis to the

curtailing of absenteeism in the department. With these resources it will be determined that abuse of sick leave can be curtailed meeting all legal statutes through both rewarding and by punishment. With this correction it will reduce monetary loss to the police department, manpower shortages and give employees more reasoning to come to work when scheduled. Amendments will be presented regarding our present absenteeism policy which will strictly outline the outcome for each abuse of sick leave therefore providing a structure for the employees. It will further be determined that this structure will be a deterrent by mere presents.

Historical, Legal, and Theoretical Context

The working economy has experience abuses in absenteeism for many decades. Many feel that a major problem began generating in the 1960's due to a change in economic and individual lifestyles. (Johns, 582) Due to the topic and reasoning behind absenteeism it is difficult to actually establish a time of origin nor one general cause of the increase. Many of the reasons will be referred to throughout this research. When taking this topic in to consideration, we must first realize that there are several constraints on the disciplinary side to the issue. The Americans with Disabilities Act (A.D.A.) and the Family and

Medical Leave Act (F.M.L.A.) are the resources used in the legality areas. They have been established, in part, to protect the rights of employees. They prevent abuse by employers to wrongfully discipline or treat employees in regards to absenteeism. ADA covers employers with 15 or more employees. This act protects employees with illnesses or disabilities that are considered serious enough to limit a major life activity. F.M.L.A. is a different act that relates mainly to employers with 50 or more employees and cover a 75-mile or more radius.

(Knudsen, 1)

We as the employer have several guidelines to follow in this matter. Some of these are as follow:

- * The employee has a right of privacy, unless it is determined by the employer that the reason for absence is pertinent to their employment.
- * The employee has a duty to report pre-scheduled absenteeism.
- * An employer's requirement to have proof of illness on each absence is unreasonable if no problem of absenteeism exists.
- * A mere assertion by the person claiming to be sick is not satisfactory proof of abuse.

* An employer has the right to refuse a doctor's excuse if it does not contain certain criteria. (ie proof employee saw a physician, release to return to work, etc.) This can result in loss of pay to an employee until stipulations are met.

* The employer must state the rejection reasoning. (Do this in writing).

* An employer may require an employee to prove fitness for work. This can be performed in areas that the employee is involved. This is extremely useful in the law enforcement field.

* Any intrusion into an employee privacy must show to be reasonable, based on individual circumstances and in relation to business.

Review of Literature and Prattice

It is the employee's responsibility to make the employer aware of a health condition that interferes with their work. (Knudsen, 2). The sole and only purpose of pay for sick leave are to assist in protecting employees against loss of income in the event of an unavoidable absence due to sickness or a non-work related injury. (Attendance, 4). Illnesses and injuries due too

on the job, are covered under the Workman's Compensation Act and are in no way related to the privilege provided by an employer in regards to sick leave. An employer can require medical certification regarding the need to take leave and a certificate releasing the employee to return to work after the leave. Such certification should include the date the serious health condition began and the estimated duration of the condition. If the employee is taking the leave to care for a family member, the certification should include a statement indicating it is necessary for that worker to care for the child, spouse or parent. If an employer doubts the validity of a worker's medical certification, it may require the eligible employee to get a second opinion from an independent health care provider of the employer's choosing. This is done at the employer's expense. If the two physicians do not agree on the prognosis, the employer and the eligible employee together must agree on a third physician whose opinion will be binding on the parties. (FAMILY)

Absenteeism costs many businesses, factories, police departments and cities several thousand dollars yearly. This monetary loss is the result of overtime pay for employees filling in, replacement of employees with temporary employees and sometimes insurance plans increase. There is further cost in the waste of administrative time due to counseling of employees. (Introduction, 2; Cascio, 1987,1) The problem of absenteeism is

further emphases during the years of 1961 - 1969. General Motors, Lordstown, OH experienced a rise in absenteeism by 56%. This increase along with increases in turnovers almost stopped productivity in the plant. (Ketchum, 4)

There are basically two types of absenteeism in today's work place: innocent and culpable. Innocent absenteeism refers to employees who are absent for reasons beyond their control. Culpable absenteeism has been referred to by many researchers as cognitive and voluntary. In this research it will further be referred to as culpable and is described as the employee who is absent without authorization for reasons which are within their control. (Guidelines, 1, Johns, 225, Conlon, 435, Chadwick, 1971). An example of this type of employee is the employee who cannot take off due to manpower shortages and decides to abuse sick leave. This is the type of employee managers and supervisors want to correct. These are further the employees who can be disciplined through progressive discipline. (Guideline, 1)

The Deer Park Police Department allows each full time employee to accrue one day sick leave per month of employment. They further reward their employees a lump sum check each November valued at 15% of one day pay for each accumulated sick day up to 90 days. This is an excellent reward system established by the City of Deer Park. Many employees receive

bonus checks for more than \$3000 yearly. The problem with this is when an employee accumulates any days beyond 90 days no reward is given. Some employees tend to use the excess days in place of vacation or compensatory time. This is abuse of sick leave.

Discussions of Relevant Issues

Through research it has been determined that this abuse can be deterred through discipline. There are basically no repercussions from this discipline if it is documented and followed closely. Further research detailed a schedule of events to take place during the abuse. With this research it is proposed to amend the departmental rules and procedures as follows:

Number of absences	Discipline
4th	Verbal counseling
5th	Letters of counseling
6th	Letters of reprimand
7th	3 days suspension
8th	20 days suspension
9th	Termination

* This chart is based on a yearly basis in which the year begins during first occurrence*

This form of discipline can only be enforced when documentation reveals an obvious abuse. These would constitute non-excused absences and a pattern exists toward abuse. The police department further reserves the right to request an employee to have a physical examination during such cases. The department further initiates the regulation that during any disciplinary process the Chief of Police will make the final determination. Keep in mind that each absence should be dealt with independently. (Guidelines, 2) This sequence of discipline can be implemented immediately using the city fiscal year as the starting point for all employees. This practice is virtually at no cost to the employer.

It is further recommended to further reward employees with excellent attendance. This reward can be as subtle as a certificate signed by the Chief, Mayor or City Manager, commending employees for no usage of sick leave each year. A brief interview with Harris County Sheriff's Department Sergeant John Glesman revealed that Harris County Sheriff's Department has a practice of providing written letters as a reward for employees who have no absences. Glesman advised that each employee who works one year without taking sick leave is given a letter from the Sheriff. Glesman further stated that many employees will use vacation time or compensatory time in lieu of their sick leave. "This letter means a great deal to the employees." stated

Glesman. Glesman further related that in the occasion that an employee, meeting this criteria, does not receive the letter, they bring it to the attention of their superior. By using Harris County as an example, it is determined that many employees look at the letter as a form of accomplishment and they in turn are proud to receive it.

The bonus reward system previously mentioned as formality for Deer Park is also an excellent rewarding system.

Further considerations should be dealt with during evaluation phases. When an employee is being evaluated, his absenteeism should be considered as part of the process. If abuse is determined then the raise should be jeopardized. Studies show that employees with 7 days or fewer absences have a 50% or greater chance of promotion and are not categorized as accident prone. In contrast, an employee with 14 days or more absences had a 50% or less chance of being promoted and would more than likely be categorized as a problem. (Latham, 322). This survey still does not address the people who are in the 7 day to 14 day absence categories. Further research determined that these employees would also be determined as possible problems.

Along with the reward and deterrent systems already emphasized, a preventative measure could also be established.

One well used preventative measure is a wellness program. Employees are rewarded with t-shirts, sweat suits, water bottles etc. for accumulation of hours spent working out with weights, running, walking and other exercises. This reward system also rewards the employers by keeping employees healthy. Although the concern is toward the persons abusing sick leave this type of program will curtail innocent absenteeism. The Harris County Health Department (HCHD) suggests A "Lunch and Learn" program which employees are shown videos on their meal breaks. HCHD advises that these videos relate to health issues from humor to heart disease. HCHD further advises that this program will reduce health care costs to the employer and employee, reduce absenteeism and will increase employee awareness and moral. (HCHD).

CONCLUSION

We as the employer need to keep in mind that in some cases there is a direct correlation between voluntary absenteeism and employees work attitudes, job satisfaction, job involvement and organizational commitment. (Brooke,1988; Herzog,1957; Behr, 1978; Mathieu 1991) With this in mind we must first take all appropriate approaches to make our workplace suitable for employee moral. Managers and employers who do nothing discover

that attendance worsens rapidly. (Perry, Sept. 1996)

Applying the steps to discipline provided earlier should always be the last resort. The following suggestions must be considered before imposing discipline.

- * Proceed with caution- Get as much information as possible from the employee in regards to his/her illness.

- * Keep the employee's health as top priority- make sure that the employee knows that he/she can use their privilege for emergencies and illnesses.

- * Act within the rights of the employer- Do this without stepping on the employees rights.

- * Base your decision on a reasonable, business related reason- manpower shortage etc.

- * Consider sick leave requests on a case by case basis. (Problem 1996)

Employers need to be reminded that the criteria to meet the discipline schedule listed are only for problem uses of absenteeism. Employees who are proven to be abusing the

absenteeism privilege only apply to this schedule. An employee with actual health problems cannot be reprimanded for their use. The determination of who is and is not abusing the privilege is ultimately the responsibility of the Chief of Police or who he so designates.

Utilizing the discipline table described earlier in this text, deterring excessive absenteeism should become a reality.. We may consider the fact that the main objective is to keep employees on the job and by their reaching the level of suspension we are creating a further problem of employee manpower shortage. Although this may be true, we must document the levels leading up to suspension and change the problem before it exists.

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